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AUTHOR Cuddy, M. Elizabeth; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Peer sociometrics, teacher ratings of academic performance, and self-concept scores were used to compare the social, academic, and psychological adjustment of 47 low-achieving/retained, low-achieving/promoted, and average achieving/promoted 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-grade students from two southern rural elementary schools. Because the sample was selected from participants in an ongoing longitudinal study, subjects' scores on the dependent variables were available for the year preceding and the year following the retention decisions. The two low-achieving groups were matched on sex, Year 1 grade, and Year 1 teacher-rated academic performance. These groups allowed for the comparison of the effects of retention and promotion upon the adjustment of students who were struggling academically. It was hypothesized that the overall adjustment of the average achievement group would be superior to that of the other two groups and that retention would detrimentally influence social and psychological adjustment. Findings suggested that in comparison to promotion of low-achieving students, retention does not exert a unique positive influence upon social and academic adjustment. Promotion led to greater decreases in peer-nominated rejection than did retention. It is concluded that promotion may be beneficial in decreasing the peer rejection of low-achieving students and, thus, may decrease the number dropping out of school. (RH)

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The Effects of Grade Retention upon the Social and Psychological Adjustment of Elementary Children

M. Elizabeth Cuddy, Cynthia Frame, and Catherine DeVincentis

Department of Psychology
The University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia 30602

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Running head: EFFECTS OF GRADE RETENTION

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Introduction

Typically, when children do not achieve minimum academic competencies, they are retained in grade. Although this practice annually involves an estimated 5.7% of American school children (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983) at an approximate 4.7 billion dollar cost to public education (Niklason, 1984), there is surprisingly little research evidence regarding the effects of retention.

A few studies (e.g., Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1971; White & Howard, 1973) have suggested that retention detrimentally influences academic achievement and social adjustment. However, because the methodology of these studies was flawed, the validity of their findings is questionable (cf. Jackson, 1975). More recently, an investigation by Plummer and Graziano (1987) indicated that retention may actually enhance the social adjustment of nonpromoted students. In this study, retained elementary children reported higher levels of self-esteem than did their promoted classmates, and all children, when asked to choose among hypothetically described peers for a study partner, preferred the child described as retained. However, because the participants were from a school with a retention rate of almost 50% and were questioned about hypothetical, rather than actual classmates, the generalizability of these findings may be limited.

The present study was designed to explore further the issues raised by the Plummer & Graziano (1987) investigation. Peer sociometrics, teacher ratings of academic performance, and scores

on the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (1984) were used to compare the social, academic, and psychological adjustment of 3 groups of children: low-achieving/retained, low-achieving/promoted, and average achievement/promoted. Because the sample was selected from a population that is involved in an ongoing longitudinal study, the participants' scores on the dependent measures were available for the year preceding (Year 1) and the year following (Year 2) the retention decisions. The two low-achieving groups were matched on sex, Year 1 grade, and Year 1 teacher-rated academic performance. These groups enabled the comparison of the effects of retention and promotion upon the adjustment of students who are struggling academically. The average achievement group, other than matching for sex and Year 1 grade, was randomly selected and provided a comparison group of students not experiencing academic problems.

For both years, it was predicted that the overall adjustment of the average achievement group would be superior to that of the other two groups. Given that the participants were selected from schools in which the annual retention rate was approximately 5%, it was predicted that retention, as an atypical experience, would detrimentally influence social and psychological adjustment. Because of the paucity of previous research, specific hypotheses regarding the effects of retention upon academic achievement were not proposed.

Method

The participants were 47 second, third, and fourth grade (i.e., grade at Year 1) children from two southern rural elementary schools. The low-achieving/retained and average achievement/promoted groups each consisted of 16 children (10 males, 6 females). The low-achieving/promoted group consisted of 15 children (10 males, 5 females); this group was smaller because of a failure to obtain a participant who matched by sex and grade with ones in the other two groups. For both Years 1 and 2, all children at these schools participated in a peer nomination procedure in which they voted for the three children whom they liked most (LM) and the three whom they liked least (LL) in their classrooms. Also, each child completed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, and the classroom teachers rated each child's academic achievement using a 5-point Likert scale.

Results

The LM and LL scores, Piers-Harris scores, and teacher ratings of academic performance were analyzed by separate 3 (group--low-achieving/retained, low-achieving/promoted, and average achievement/promoted) by 2 (time of testing--Year 1, Year 2) analyses of variance. There were no significant main effects or interactions on the LM variable.

The results indicated a significant group x time interaction for number of LL nominations ($p < .04$). Planned comparisons indicated that the number of LL nominations received by the low-achieving/retained group significantly decreased over time ($p < .05$) as did that of the low-achieving/promoted group ($p < .01$). The decrease in peer-nominated rejection was most pronounced in the low-achieving/promoted group. These results are graphically depicted in Figure 1. The number of LL nominations received by the average achievement/promoted group did not change over time.

There were no significant main effects or interactions on the Piers-Harris scores. As would be expected by the group definitions, the results indicated that for both Years 1 and 2, the teacher-rated academic performance of the average achievement/promoted group was superior to that of the low-achieving groups. However, there was a significant group x time interaction ($p < .009$) such that the teacher-rated academic performance of both the low-achieving/retained and low-achieving/promoted groups improved over time while the

performance of the average achievement group did not change. Post hoc tests indicated that for the low-achieving groups, retention and promotion did not differentially influence teacher-rated academic performance. These results are graphically depicted in Figure 2.

Discussion

These results suggest that in comparison to promotion of low-achieving students, retention does not exert a unique positive influence upon social and academic adjustment. In fact, these results indicate that whether retained or promoted, the academic adjustment of low-achieving students remains below that of average controls but improves somewhat over time. The effects of retention itself on sociometric status and self-concept were negligible, with one exception.

Although retention and promotion did not differentially influence peer-nominated popularity, promotion led to greater decreases in peer-nominated rejection than did retention. Given that peer-nominated rejection is strongly associated with risk for school drop-out (Parker & Asher, in press), these findings may have important educational implications. That is, promotion may be especially beneficial in decreasing the peer rejection of low-achieving students and thus, may decrease their risk for later school drop-out. Of course, such conclusions call for longer longitudinal study of promoted and retained low-achieving students. Also, given that the timing of pubertal development has different implications for boys and girls (Peterson & Crockett, 1985), the effects of retention and promotion upon peer rejection may become especially apparent in middle school, as compared to elementary grades, and may differ by sex. Again, such conclusions await further study.

The discrepancies between the findings of this study and those of Plummer & Graziano (1987) may be a result of the different retention rates in the populations from which the children were selected. That is, when retention is an atypical event, it does not produce unique positive effects upon children's social, psychological, and academic adjustment.

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Figure 1

Number of Liked Least (LL) Nominations As A Function of Group and Time of Testing

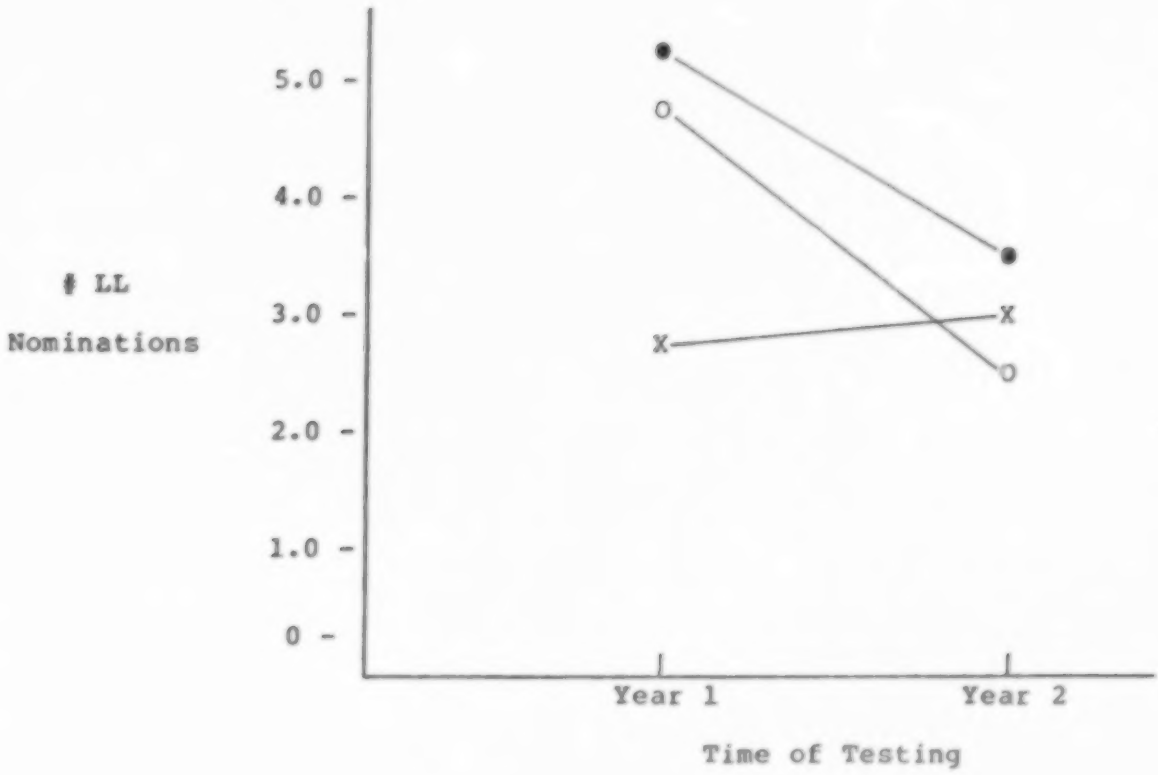
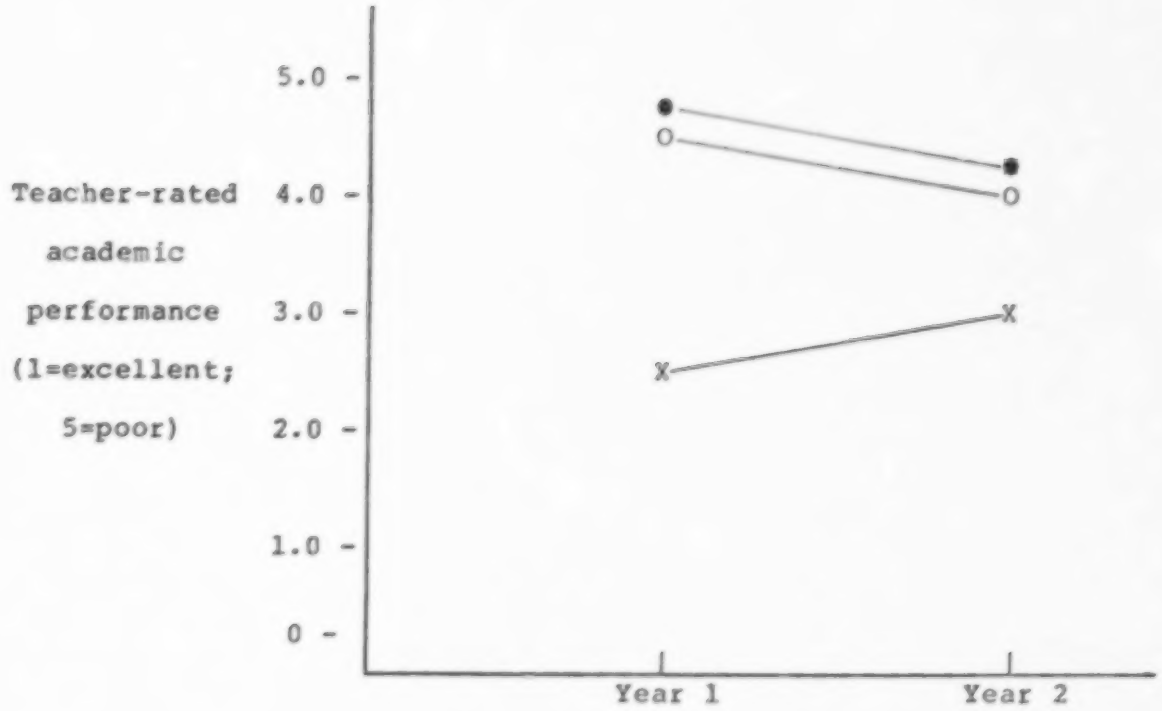


Figure 2

Teacher Ratings of Academic Performance As a Function of Group and Time of Testing



● Low-Achieving/retained group
O Low-Achieving/promoted group
X Average Achievement/promoted group